

FEATURE

After 15 years ...

Marine graduates after disabling injury sent him home

CPL. JENNIFER BROFER
STAFF WRITER

Fourteen years, six months, three weeks and five days ago, 18-year-old Recruit Michael A. Smith came to Parris Island and set foot on the infamous yellow footprints for the first time with a goal – becoming one of the elite few.

Nearly 15 years later, 32-year-old Lance Cpl. Smith’s dream became a reality when he graduated recruit training today as the guide and honor graduate for Platoon 3001, Mike Co., 3rd RTBn.

On June 14, 1989, Smith came to the Depot for the first time to earn the coveted title of Marine. Four weeks later, his dream was shattered when an unfortunate fall rendered him medically unable to continue with training.

“During bayonet training of the first phase of boot camp, I dove into a trench and slammed the rifle into my chest – it was severe,” Smith explained. “It deflated my fluid sack in between the rib cage and the lungs. Basically, when I tried to breathe it was just like two pieces of raw meat rubbing. I couldn’t breathe, so I hyperventilated. I was sent to medical and was medically discharged.”

After he was discharged, he returned home to Wimauma, Fla., consumed by the anguish of failure.

“I cried like a baby,” Smith admitted. Coping with the feeling of defeat, he tried to move on with his life. He later got married, had a child and held jobs at a fire department, juvenile detention center, federal law enforcement agency and an insurance agency. However, his desire to be a Marine never left him. Ever since he was a toddler, he has wanted nothing more than to pin on the Marine Corps emblem.

“I have always been a military buff,” he said. “My mother would tell you that since the age of 2, I would stand at attention in my room ready for inspection every weekend.”

The four years spent in the Reserve Officer Training Corps in high school only amplified his desire to become a Marine, he said.

“I’ve always been gung ho on whatever was the best of the best, and I like to be faced with the challenge of doing that,” said Smith.

Feeling it was the right time to return, Smith received an age waiver to reenlist as a Marine Corps Reservist and shipped to Parris Island for the second time in October 2003. A lot had changed since his first time getting off the bus at Receiving.

“The first time around I was very scared, timid and did not know what to expect,” said Smith, whose green eyes now bear laugh lines, vice the fresh-

faced youth who first came to the island many years ago. “The second time, I knew what to expect and was much more prepared for it. The second time around I was driven by motivation. I wasn’t here to fail again – I came here to complete it.”

According to his senior drill instructor, Smith stood out above the rest of the recruits since the forming phase of recruit training, which is why he was named the platoon guide, a leadership role only bestowed to the most squared away recruit. Smith’s prior experience in recruit training, as well as his maturity level, helped his leadership abilities flourish.

“The recruits sort of looked to him as a father figure and for motivation,” said Staff Sgt. Jamal Cook, Smith’s senior drill instructor. “They looked to him for guidance because he had been here before ... he’s very motivating, professional and intelligent.”

Cook added that Smith’s “take charge attitude” had the recruits responding to him just as they did to the drill instructors, who all happen to be younger than Smith.

Smith said being older than all of his drill instructors, one of whom is 22 years old, did not bother him in the least.

“I don’t look at age when it comes to the drill instructors,” said Smith. “I have worked for people younger than me in the past. It’s interesting that the drill instructors are younger than me,

but I feel that they are more knowledgeable and advanced than me when it comes to a military life aspect.”

Though Smith has no qualms about taking orders from the younger drill instructors, interacting with and being in charge of recruits, who are up to 15 years younger than him, was a whole different story.

“It’s got its ups and downs,” said Smith. “I wanted to lead the platoon

and help them learn based on my life experiences and knowledge. But on the flip side of that, with my maturity level, as opposed to the maturity level of some of the recruits who are here now, it made it pretty difficult. I have a 9-year-old son that, when I tell him to do something, listens. Whereas, here the recruits have their own mentalities, and some listen, some don’t.”

Despite being the oldest member of his platoon, Smith never let his age bare limitations on his performance level throughout recruit training.

“I still stomped some of the platoon pretty good when it came to PT,” said Smith, who boasted having a run time of 19 minutes, 5 seconds – the third fastest run time in the platoon. “I’m driven to be the fastest one in the platoon. Being the oldest, I felt that I had to prove myself as being equal or better to the other recruits.”

Throughout his 13 weeks on Parris Island, Smith proved to his fellow recruits, as well as his drill instructors, that he deserved the role he had been given.

“He’s the recruit they voted to be the honor graduate,” said Cook. “The drill instructors also agreed he should be the honor graduate.”

Smith said he was looking forward to finally receiving his Eagle, Globe and Anchor, the coveted emblem he had



Cpl. Jennifer Brofer

Recruit Michael A. Smith, guide for Platoon 3001, Mike Co., 3rd RTBn., looks on as he prepares to lead his platoon back to the squad bay after firing at Hue City Range during A-line Dec. 17. Smith first came to the Depot in 1989 to become a Marine, however an injury prevented him from completing recruit training.

worked so hard, and waited so long, to receive.

“I’m trying to figure out how I’m going to respond to receiving the Eagle, Globe and Anchor,” said Smith, three weeks prior to the emblem ceremony. “I’m sure I’m going to wind up bawling like a baby.”

“It’s something that can’t be wrapped

up in words,” he added. “Pure emotional feelings of joy and success for accomplishing something that I failed at in the past ... for doing something that a lot of people basically said that I was crazy for trying to do again.”

Smith walked off the parade deck today and left Parris Island for the second time. This time, he left a Marine.